

# Trained to free Indochina POWs he frets at home

By Ben Bradlee  
Globe Staff

LOS ANGELES - Three months ago, former Green Beret Lt. Col. James (Bo) Gritz, a much-decorated Vietnam war hero and an American original, was leading a team of 25 other ex-Special Forces soldiers in combat maneuvers in the steamy, mosquito-infested woods of central Florida, preparing for a mission to rescue a group of American servicemen who some think are still being held captive in a Laos prison camp.

Today, his mission scrapped in late March because of official pressure and a lack of money, the 42-year-old Gritz paces about his modest, ranch-style tract home here, slipping Dr. Peppers, honing his muscular frame with a weight-lifting and running regimen, but uncertain what he is in training for. He is a thoroughbred with no race to run.

Gritz had spent the last 30 months preparing for a POW rescue by weaving a subtle link between the Pentagon, private industry and the shadowy world of Southeast Asian covert operatives. He said that his rescue plan, partially funded by Dallas multimillionaire H. Ross Perot, was a private one but took on semi-official status because he was given access to top-secret intelligence generated by US agents, satellites and reconnaissance planes.

This information was made available to him, without official authorization, by several high Pentagon officials whom he described as being disillusioned with what they viewed as the Carter Administration's inattention to the prisoner of war and missing in action issue.

Gritz said the intelligence was passed to him through an intermediary, whom he would not identify, both orally and in documents. He has a 6-inch stack of official documents on the POW-MIA issue, some labeled top-secret, which have been seen, but not examined, by The Globe. Other documents, which are in The Globe's possession, as well as interviews with officials and others familiar with the issue, confirm Gritz' access to high-level sources in government.

Though Gritz is skeptical that many Americans really care about the POWs, his private effort has unfolded against a backdrop of increased official activity on the issue, starting in mid-1979, when the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) formed a task force to address the question; until June 25 of this year, when DIA director Lt. Gen. Eugene F. Tighe Jr. told a congressional subcommittee in Washington that he believed the weight of US intelligence today proved that there were still American POWs being held against their will in Indochina.

Tighe told Congress that there were 2497 Americans still unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. He said that since the fall of Saigon in 1975, the DIA had collected 327 reports from refugees of first-hand sightings of US prisoners. Of these, he said, 208 are the subject of current investigation and confirmation efforts, while the rest are Americans who have already returned or are known to be dead.

Tighe's statement that he believed there still were American prisoners being held marked the first time since 1973 - when the country was told that "the last POWs" had been repatriated from Vietnam - that any official in any Administration has deviated from the position that there was "no substantial evidence" that any American servicemen were still being held against their will.

The Tighe statement will renew pressure on the Reagan Administration to do something about the POWs, just one month after the Washington Post reported that the United States had recently dispatched a group of Lao mercenaries into Laos to try to determine if about 30 Americans were being held in a prison camp there, as was indicated by reconnaissance photographs. The foray reportedly brought back no evidence, but the Pentagon has refused to comment on the mission.

Tighe also declined to elaborate on the reported reconnaissance mission before Congress, nor would he speculate on whether it might have been a precursor to an official US rescue attempt.

But Gritz says that one of the reasons he called off his private rescue mission was that he was told in early March of this year, by one of the Pentagon officials with whom he had dealings, that the government was planning a rescue attempt at the same Laos target during the third week in April.

Pentagon officials declined to comment on Gritz' statement, and a high White House official denied it.

Gritz was well-suited for the mission he had planned to lead. A native of Oklahoma, he is the son of a B17 pilot who was killed in World War II, and now has two sons of his own who are in the Special Forces. He is a 22-year Army veteran with 18 of those years in the Special Forces. Gritz spent four years in Vietnam in the mid-'60s, during which he undertook more than 100 missions behind enemy lines.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, in his autobiography, devoted a chapter entitled "The American Soldier" to Gritz' exploits.

Though Gritz' bearing and demeanor are military through and through, his resume shows him to be a Renaissance Green Beret able to do far more than fall atop a grenade on command. He is a graduate of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and holds a master's degree in communications from American University in Washington, D.C. He speaks Swahili and Mandarin Chinese, is a marathon runner and is a black belt in karate.

Gritz served as commander of the Special Forces battalion in Panama before assuming a post as chief of congressional relations for the Pentagon's Defense Security Assistance Agency, which oversees US military assistance programs overseas.

It was while working at this job in February 1979 that Gritz said he was approached by a Pentagon su-

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